

Narrator:

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Freedom of the press declined in almost every region of the world in 2009, according to a study released April 29 by Freedom House, an international nongovernmental organization that researches and monitors democratic freedoms around the world. The report is called Freedom of the Press 2010: A Global Survey of Media Independence. It found that press freedom declined for the eighth consecutive year, and only one in six people lives in a country with genuinely free media.

According to Freedom House, the improvement in press freedom following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in 1989 has stalled, and in some cases reversed in the last 10 years. At the same time, there has been a dramatic expansion of online media as well as cable and satellite television. The expansion of communication possibilities means that total control over news and information has become more difficult. As a result, Freedom House found that in 2009, many authoritarian regimes increased their efforts to place restrictions on all conduits for news and information.

The Internet and new media have become the new battlegrounds for government control. Repressive governments are attempting to restrict Internet freedom with lawsuits, direct censorship, content manipulation and physical harassment of bloggers, the report says. The Chinese government, especially, has introduced several new methods of Internet censorship and has remained “a global leader in the jailing of journalists,” according to the Freedom House report.

Looking at the world’s regions, Freedom House found that only 48 percent of the countries in the Americas could be rated as having a completely free media. Cuba and Venezuela were deemed to have “not free” media environments. The Asia-Pacific region was the one bright spot found by the study, even though the region is home to well-known, media-repressing regimes such as North Korea and Burma. Only 12 countries and territories in the Asia-Pacific are rated as “not free,” according to Freedom House.

Central and Eastern Europe, along with the countries of the former Soviet Union, underwent modest decline or no change. Russia remained among the world’s more repressive and dangerous media environments. Kyrgyzstan’s media freedom score fell; but Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova showed slight improvement.

In the Middle East, Iran showed the region’s biggest decline of the year due to the suppression of journalists in the wake of the June 2009 presidential election. Iraq saw some improvement for free media as political bias declined and attacks on journalists decreased, the study says.

In Africa, Freedom House found significant declines in the level of press freedom. For the first time since 1990, no county in southern Africa was scored as “free.” In a surprising status change, South Africa and Namibia both dropped from “free” to “partly free”

countries. Freedom House cited slight improvements, however, in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Sudan and Mauritania.

Freedom House's rankings for countries in Western Europe remained fairly stable. But, the report says, "the United Kingdom remains a concern due to its expansive libel laws."

By age 11, Luis J. Rodríguez was already a veteran of the gang wars in East Los Angeles. He escaped that world through poetry and literature, he says, and found success as an author and community activist. In his memoir, *Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, he captured his experience as a gang member and his use of drugs, testifying to the city's dark underside. He now shares his story with youth across the United States and Latin America to provide those at risk for violence with hope and the tools for change.

During a weeklong program in February sponsored by the U.S. Department of State in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City, Mexico, the writer and community activist drew from his experience to share ideas about how to create community in violent times. Rodríguez spoke with youth at juvenile detention facilities, gave presentations at the state's largest university, and conducted workshops with community organizers. Rodríguez said his philosophy for community building focuses on empowering young people through the arts, creativity, imagination and looking at the roots of violence.

His stories reached audiences at a personal level. The exchanges were constructive and honest. The goal, he says, is to help repair communities — like Ciudad Juárez — that have been most affected by drug-related violence. Over 4,300 homicides were recorded over the past year in Ciudad Juárez. In March 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton led a delegation of top-ranking officials to Mexico to discuss the issues of violence and drug trafficking.

Rodríguez visited the Juárez Juvenile Detention Center and forged a connection with many of the juvenile inmates by sharing details about his own incarceration at a young age. Rodríguez said the detention center is the only juvenile facility in that area that provides arts and expression training.

"A rich and intimate discussion was held with spiritually hungry and intelligent young people — although many have committed serious crimes, including murder," Rodríguez wrote on his blog. Rodríguez told inmates about the gang life that put him in jail, his transformation through writing and poetry while there, and the struggles he faced as he began to reconstruct his life after serving a prison sentence. Many of the inmates were serving sentences for similar crimes and also felt that they had little voice within a community surrounded by violence.

On his return to Los Angeles, Rodríguez shared his positive experience in Mexico with community members and activists. The other side of the story, he said, is that most people in places like Juárez or Chihuahua and probably most of Mexico are working hard to stop violence and to work with the kids. They are doing the very best that they can with very little resources. He left Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua with a hopeful message. "Even in the

midst of violence and poverty, there can come great poems, great songs, great practical organizational measures,” he said. “Always showing the worst aspects doesn’t point out that there’s actually a lot of strong positive energy for change in those communities.”

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